

PERSONAL MEMORY AND POLITICAL HISTORY
An interview with Claudia Moscovici
by Henrieta Anișoara Șerban

Claudia Moscovici is Romanian by birth. The author emigrated to the USA when she was 11. Currently, she is an American professor of philosophy, art, literature and ideas at Boston University and Michigan University, novelist and art/literary critic. She became well-known as the author of Velvet Totalitarianism (Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2009) a biographical meaningful novel about the impact of the communist regime on a Romanian family which survived oppression provided the force of the human inner fibre. The translation of this novel was titled in Romanian Între două lumi, that is, Between Two Worlds (Curtea Veche Publishing, 2011). Her works are animated by a dual passion for political philosophy and for the Romantic and postromantic movements present in works such as Romanticism and postromanticism (Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2009), Gender and Citizenship (Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2000) and Double dialectics (Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2002). Other books are Dangerous Liaisons (Hamilton Books, 2011) and The Seducer (Hamilton Books, 2012).



Henrieta Șerban: It is a real pleasure to present you, Ms. Claudia Moscovici, political thinker, novelist and literary critic, to the readers, but I think there is no better presentation than the one described by the person herself.

Claudia Moscovici: Ms. Șerban, the pleasure is mutual. I appreciate the opportunity to answer your questions.

H.Ș.: You are the author of Velvet Totalitarianism. What triggered your interest in writing this book? Was that interest to a certain extent therapeutic?

C.M.: Since I immigrated to the United States at the age of eleven I wanted to write the story of our lives in communist Romania. Not just about my life, but the lives of so many Romanians living in a communist autocracy. Because I was also an academic and a mother of two young children, it took me a long time to finish this novel. Almost ten years. So I had plenty of time to ponder the issue of why I was writing it. I asked myself: Why write historical fiction about the Cold War, an era which is now relegated mostly to history books? Why is the history of Romanian communism so important to me and whom do I hope to reach in writing fiction about it? An anecdote brought these questions into sharper focus. Friends of my parents, who have a son who's not much younger than myself, told us that their son recalls only one thing about life under the Ceausescu regime in the mid 1980's, when he was not yet a teenager.

Now in his thirties, the young man remembers that as a child he frequently had to go to bed wearing his hat and coat during the winter, because there was no heat or hot water in their apartment in the late 1980's. But he can't recall much else about the hardships the Romanian people endured during the Ceausescu dictatorship. He knows only indirectly, from older family members and from history books, the childhood memories which I can still recall quite vividly, and which I wanted to depict for others in my writing.

It's one thing to read about the institutions and events that characterized life in totalitarian Romania and quite another to have lived through them. For my family and I, the events I describe in *Velvet Totalitarianism* are real. So I also had a highly personal motivation for processing the communist past and turning it into fiction. This was a therapeutic process, as you state in your question, for two main reasons. Writing helped me process a painful past while also making a bridge between my life in communist Romania and my life in the U.S. These parts of my past were so radically different that sometimes they struck me as two parallel lives.

I left Romania during a transitional age, when I was a pre-teen. Every adolescent feels some discontinuity between their life as a child, when they're very dependent on parents, grandparents and teachers and their lives as a young

adult, when they're finding their own identity. But this discontinuity is more extreme, and traumatic, when you move from one culture to another and experience such radically different societies and types of government.

To return to your initial question, my motivation in writing this historical novel was simultaneously personal and therapeutic (to work through psychologically lingering memories of my childhood), creative (to transform them into fiction) and historical (to contribute to the collective memory of the communist past in Romania).

H.Ş.: Totalitarianism brought about a bleak reality, a true reign of fear. Why nearing the idea of "velvet" to the concept of totalitarianism?

C.M.: In using the term "velvet", and thus alluding to the "softer", "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia, I wanted to contrast the Ceausescu regime and other such communist dictatorships during the second part of the twentieth century to the Stalinist era in Eastern Europe during the first half of the century. Stalinism was far worse in terms of claiming tens of millions of lives in gulags, mass trials and purges by the Secret Police and through a policy of deliberate starvation of entire regions (such as the Ukraine).

In Romania, Lena Constante's moving memoir, *The Silent Escape*, captures the horrors of the Stalinist phase under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's regime. However, just because Stalinism was worse, it doesn't mean that the Ceausescu era wasn't terrible as well.

In fact, conditions in Romania during the so-called "Epoch of Light" were notoriously miserable. I recall from my childhood that we had to wait in long lines for meager supplies of food, clothing and household goods. There was limited heat and hot water. By the late 1970's, the Secret Police had installed microphones in virtually every home and apartment. The whole population lived in fear. As a Romanian citizen said to a French journalist following the fall of the Ceausescu regime, "It was a system that didn't destroy people physically -- not many were actually killed; but it was a system that condemned us to a fight for the lowest possible level of physical and spiritual nourishment.

Under Ceausescu, some people died violently, but an entire population was dying." Although *Velvet Totalitarianism* focuses mostly on Romania, hundreds of millions of Eastern Europeans led similar lives to the ones I describe, struggling daily against poverty, hunger, state indoctrination, surveillance, censorship and oppression in post-Stalinist communist regimes. In actuality, although not as bad as Stalinism – and thus a "softer" or "velvet" form totalitarianism – Ceausescu's regime killed the Romanian people's spirit even though it didn't claim as many lives as Gheorghiu-Dej's Stalinist dictatorship.

H. Ș.: What did the Jewish heritage mean during communism?

C.M.: Being Jewish in a communist regime was certainly not a blessing, but it was less of a curse than being a Jew during the Fascist era. Of course, had Stalin survived to carry out as planned the anti-Jewish campaigns associated with "the Doctors' Plot" those actions and attitudes would have swept across Eastern Europe and might have rivaled the Holocaust in its destruction of whatever was left of Eastern European Jewry. As it was, anti-Semitism in Romania under the communist regime was a more complex and subtle phenomenon, leading to some institutionalized discrimination but also to the periodic export of Romanian Jews to Israel. Radu Ioanid described this process in *The Ransom of the Jews: The Story of Extraordinary Secret Bargain Between Romania and Israel*. As a matter of fact, several members of my extended family took advantage of these possibilities to immigrate to Israel. I do not view my identity as a Romanian-American Jew as a contradiction, however. It's who I am, a cultural and ethnic hybrid. For me, being Jewish is as much a part of my cultural heritage as being Romanian and American. Just as I wrote about Romania and its communist past in *Velvet Totalitarianism*, I am now reconnecting to my Jewish roots and working on two books about the Holocaust: a collection of reviews and a historical novel about the Warsaw Jewish Ghetto.

H.Ș.: In your view should totalitarianism be linked exclusively to the communist Stalinist regimes?

C.M.: I think that along with Stalinism the Nazi regimes institutionalized one of the most lethal form of totalitarianism in human history. There have been repressive autocracies in previous centuries and there have been ruthless tyrants such as Genghis Khan capable of pillage and genocide. But I would agree with Hannah Arendt that totalitarianism is a modern, twentieth century phenomenon. It is stronger and more intrusive than any dictatorship or autocracy of the past. Totalitarian regimes control not only the state, the military, the judicial system and the press, but also reach into people's minds, to dictate what they should say, think and feel. Hannah Arendt has argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that one of the key features of the totalitarian state is its system of indoctrination, propaganda, isolation, intimidation and brainwashing – instigated and supervised by the Secret Police – which transforms *classes*, or thoughtful individuals able to make relatively sound political decisions, into *masses*, or people who have been so beaten down that they become apathetic and give their unconditional loyalty to the totalitarian regime. Whether it takes a Stalinist or Fascist form, there's nothing more dangerous and destructive than totalitarianism.

H.S.: Would you say that the individual was crushed under the communist regime and the roles that it prescribed?

C.M.: Yes I would. The individual has no place in any totalitarian regime. They all cultivate mass obedience, ideological fervor. They seek to destroy not only individual consciousness but also the fabric of the nuclear family, friendships and community. They discourage empathy – branding it as disloyalty to the regime or a form of weakness – and encourage raw hatred of certain classes or ethnic groups: the “enemies” within. They destroy our humanity. And that’s what’s so difficult to grasp about totalitarian regimes. How our human feelings, our loyalty to family and friends, our empathy for those who suffer, can be so thoroughly eroded. For some people it’s eroded only in their external behavior, while they manage to maintain a sense of humanity psychologically. For others, the ideological indoctrination comes to define who they are, or who they become. In fact, one of the most difficult things to grasp about the history of totalitarianism is how hundreds of millions of people all over Europe and the Soviet Union could have allowed the horrors of the Holocaust and the mass purges to take place.

In her monumental study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt offers one of the best explanations I’ve read for these mass horrors. “Mass” is the key concept for her. Arendt’s explanation consists of describing this modern social entity called “the masses,” which she distinguishes from the mob (itself capable of spurts of violence, such as during pogroms) as well as from classes (based on economic self-interest). The masses are a quintessentially totalitarian phenomenon.

Unlike social classes, Arendt explains, the masses are amorphous and can be easily swayed. They’re moved by superficial rhetoric and empty fervor rather than united by a common identity or shared economic interests. According to Arendt, “The term masses applies only when we deal with people who either because of their sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest.” (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 311). Of course, this political and social apathy isn’t enough to lend support to totalitarian movements. An additional, and crucial, factor comes into play. The apathetic masses must come under the spell of charismatic evil leaders, like Hitler and Stalin, who gain control over society and kill in them the last vestige of human decency and individualism. If “the masses” don’t exist in sufficient numbers in a given society, then totalitarian rulers create them. This was the main purpose, Arendt contends, of Stalin’s periodic purges, which destroyed any real class identity and ideological conviction. Even the nuclear family and bonds of love deteriorated, as friends feared friends and parents lived under the

reasonable worry that even their own children could at any moment turn them in for “deviationism” from the party line.

H. Ș.: To what extent is political history deformed by personal memory?

C.M.: I have included in *Velvet Totalitarianism* some elements of what I recalled about our family’s past and living in communist Romania. Both personal and collective memories, since our experiences weren’t unique. Like countless others who lived in communist dictatorships, my family and I were subject to constant state indoctrination. Like practically everyone else except for the very privileged, we waited in long lines for meager supplies of food and consumer goods. Since my father traveled abroad, our apartment was bugged – we discovered hidden microphones underneath his desk and inside the heating units – and the Securitate followed my parents’ movements. My father worked at the Mathematics Institute. His boss was Nicolae Ceausescu’s daughter, Zoe Ceausescu, who actually went against some of her father’s policies by allowing him to go to scholarly conferences abroad. This rare privilege was essential to a mathematician’s – or, for that matter, any intellectual’s – career. Nobody can thrive intellectually without a free exchange of information and an awareness of the latest international discoveries in one’s field. In spite of Zoe Ceausescu’s umbrage, however, my father was accused by the Securitate of being an Israeli spy upon his return from a conference in Jerusalem. He was told that he’d no longer be allowed out of the country. No doubt this individual decision was not really personal. It coincided with Ceausescu’s national policy of closing the Iron Curtain, to further isolate and control the Romanian people. Fortunately, my father obtained permission to attend one last conference, at the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies. He decided to take a chance and defect to the United States. Since my mother and I were still in Romania, my family struggled to reunite in the United States for nearly two years. Although there were precedents for similar immigrations, we lived under the rational fear that we might never see each other again. My mother was subject to demoralizing Securitate interrogations similar to the ones I describe in *Velvet Totalitarianism*. Yet, as I also depict in the novel, we never gave up or lost hope. Several congressmen and human rights organizations intervened on our behalf. When I was a few weeks shy of my twelfth birthday we finally joined my father in the United States.

I think that rather than political history being deformed by these memories in the novel, these memories were deformed by political history. I’ve read numerous history and political science books to write this historical novel. After all, one can’t rely upon childhood memories – fading, incomplete, distorted and enhanced by the imagination as they are – to write historical fiction. So I changed most of the autobiographical elements of my past to transform them into fiction –

plot, characterization and resolution – as well as to make them conform to the factual history I researched.

H.S.: How do you comment Zizek's view in his work *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*

C.M.: In this book Zizek argues that totalitarianism is not as far apart from liberal democracy as we might believe. He describes totalitarianism in terms of four key elements: 1) the Holocaust as pure evil; 2) the Stalinist gulag and Great Terror; 3) religious fundamentalism and 4) a deconstructionist move that links not just Nazism and Stalinism but also liberal democracies to “the ontological closure of thought”. I accept and agree with the first three points, but think that it's more productive to look at the last point in terms of political history rather than deconstructive rhetorical (and philosophical) moves. In my opinion, liberal democracies are vulnerable to totalitarianism not because of some inherent ontological closure of liberal thought, as Zizek maintains, but because the political structure of democracy is very permeable. It can be infiltrated and taken over by extremist, intolerant and hateful ideological groups, which is how the Nazis gradually rose to power during the 1930's in the Weimar Republic. This is relevant in our times as well. For instance, who knows what will happen to Greek democracy today. It may thrive in a leftist coalition, or it may be taken over by the Marxist-Communist fringe.

As for the books that best help us understand totalitarianism, I find political history and historical philosophy most relevant to illuminating this subject. Hannah Arendt, Robert Conquest, Alan Bullock, Richard Pipes, Raul Hilberg, Max Hastings, Antony Beevor, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Dennis Deletant: these are some of the writers who can inform us about Fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism in a clear, well-researched and thoughtful manner.

As far as social psychology goes, I prefer the writings of Serge Moscovici, a Romanian-born social theorist who recently passed away (on November 16, 2014). Growing disenchanted with the Communist party, Moscovici moved to Paris, where he began studying psychology at the Sorbonne. His 1961 thesis, which would be published as a book in 1976, *La psychanalyse, son image, son public*, covered the relatively new field – group or social psychology – that would eventually gain him world renown. Having lived through both Nazi and Communist regimes – oppressed by one for being Jewish, disillusioned with the other – his research covered the psychological factors behind conformity (and mass movements) and the role of minorities in influencing larger group dynamics. Through a series of psychological experiments, he arrived at the scientific conclusion, which he had already witnessed in his life, that minorities can, indeed, influence the actions of the majority, even when what they say is counterintuitive

or just plain false. These psychological experiments can be used to explain, in part, the manner in which totalitarian movements – Fascism and Communism alike – began as minority views and ended up ruling the majority throughout European and Eastern Block countries, even those that had budding liberal democracies.

H.Ș.: Do you think there is any totalitarian threat in present-day terrorism?

C.M.: Terrorism and totalitarianism have “terror” in common. During the 1930’s and 40’s, “Terror” became associated with the rise of totalitarian regimes—Nazism and Communism – which acquired almost total control of entire countries and regions by instilling fear in the population. The democratic concepts of freedom of speech, human rights and justice became meaningless. To offer one example out of many, the Nazi Minister of Interior, Hermann Goering, addressed the German people to announce discriminatory measures against the Jews by explicitly stating: “My measures will not be crippled by any bureaucracy. Here I don’t have to worry about Justice; my mission is only to destroy and exterminate, nothing more.” Terrorists adopt similar tactics. Sometimes they may claim to act in the name of social or divine justice, but they always adopt measures that deliberately violate human rights and ethics. Terrorism, be it the bombing of the World Trade Centers or the more recent attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, refers to acts of violence and/or the threat of violence, particularly against helpless civilians. Like the totalitarian regimes, which govern through terror, they target not only the immediate victims of the attacks, but also the wider public who witnesses (via the media) the punishment: especially the groups or the citizens of the nations they declare to be “enemies”.

H.Ș.: The personal is political, especially when the individual sees herself as a work of art and her presence in the world is infused with this type of value. But is politics somehow still inspiring?

C.M.: For me, the field of politics is very inspiring, especially in hindsight, when its contours become much better defined, the more trivial elements of the past are lost or forgotten, and we can see it as history. Politics was in large part what inspired me to write historical fiction. In *Velvet Totalitarianism* I wanted to leave a trace of the scale of comparison, of the difference I experienced between the lack of absolute freedom in the United States and the lack of any freedom in Communist Romania. As the narrator of my novel states at the end, I hope that my description of daily life in Romania under the Ceausescu regime will convey to my children and to my children’s children – as well as to all readers interested in

this subject – the lost traces of a communist era in which ordinary people were forced to lead extraordinary lives.

H. Ş.: Which are your projects for the future?

C.M.: I'm currently working on a nonfiction book of reviews of Holocaust memoirs, novels and films called *Holocaust Memory*. Many of its chapters also appear on the Romanian culture blog, *Literatura de Azi*, whose Director is the literary critic Daniel Cristea-Enache and whose Editor-in-Chief is Odilia Rosianu. After I finish this book, I'd like to start working on a historical novel about Doctor Janucz Korczak and the orphaned children of the Warsaw Ghetto, whom he took care of during the Holocaust. In August 1942, the Nazis sent them all to the death camp Treblinka. For me, Korczak represents a symbol of humanity and courage in the face of unimaginably adverse circumstances and with heavier responsibilities than most people could bear. There's perhaps no greater responsibility than protecting innocent children's lives. Learning about Korczak's tragic fate, and that of the Jewish orphans, may help sensitize a new generation of young readers to the horrors of the Holocaust.

H. Ş.: Thank you so much for your answers.

C.M.: Thank you as well for this thought-provoking interview.

BOOK REVIEWS

